Athi Varadar And His Unique Realm

Athi Varadar pacifies Saraswati

One day, Goddess Lakshmi and Saraswati go to Lord Brahma and ask him who he thought was superior: Lakshmi or Saraswati. Brahma says Lakshmi is the superior of the two. Saraswati, Brahma's wife takes away Brahma's divine wand of creation, the Shristi Danda, from him in a fit of fury.

Brahma meditates upon Vishnu for years together because he is unable to continue with his work of creation without the Shristi Danda. Finally, Vishnu appears before him and tells him that he can get another Shristi Danda for himself if he performs a 100 Ashwamedha Yagnas. Brahma knows that if he performs one Ashwamedha Yagna in a Vishnu Kshetra, it will grant him the benefit of a 100 Ashwamedha Yagnas. So he asks Vishwakarma, the architect of Gods to build him a Yagna shala opposite the Yoga Narasimha idol in the Athi (Fig tree) forest near Kanchipuram.

He does not invite Saraswati for the Yagna. An infuriated Saraswati seeks the help of the asuras and tries to disrupt Brahma's Ashwamedha Yagna. Vishnu neutralizes all her Shaktis, asks her to shed her ego and patch up with Brahma. Saraswati refuses to do so, transforms herself into Vegavathi river and tries to ruin the Ashwamedha Yagna with the force of her waters.

That is when Lord Vishnu resorts to "Maana- bhanga" wherein he lies totally nude across Vegavathi and forces her to reflect

on her actions. Saraswati feels ashamed of herself when she sees Vishnu’s nude body across her waters and disappears into Patala immediately.

The Yagna is completed without any further hindrances. On the last day of the Yagna, Athi Varadar a.k. a. Sri Varadaraja Swamy emerges from the Yagna Kund and hands over a Shristi Danda to Brahma.

After the Yagna is over Vishnu forgives Saraswati and restores her Shaktis to her. Vishnu then decides to reside forever as Athi Varadar atop the Elephant hill in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu.

Athi Varadar reclines in a bed of water

The presiding deity of the Sri Varadaraja Swamy temple that we currently worship in Kanchipuram is made out of granite. The idol of Athi Varadar, an exact replica of the presiding deity is sculpted out of Athi (Fig tree) wood and can be found within the temple premises itself BUT lies submerged underwater for over 400 years for some strange reason.

The Ananta Saras Tank

Within the Sri Varadaraja Swamy temple premises, lies the beautiful Ananta Saras tank. The Athi Varadar idol lies enclosed in an underground granite vault that lies below the Ananta Saras tank. Lord Vishnu lies there in sweet slumber for 40 years. But once in every 40 or 42 years, the idol of Athi Varadar is brought out of the granite vault and is worshipped by all his devotees with great fervour. In fact, over one crore people

visited Kanchipuram during the latest exposition of Athi Varadar in July – August 2019.

Experiencing Divinity

70 priests climb down 12 steps in the Ananta Saras tank to reach the granite vault. But before they do so, the water of the Ananta Saras tank is emptied into the Pottramarai Kulam pond, the golden lotus pond near it.

The priests say, “The Athi Varadar idol has remained underwater for more than 400 years yet it looks as divine and fresh as if it were sculpted yesterday. The idol of Athi Varadar has not decomposed or disintegrated in any way. We feel as if we are entering into a divine realm, which is beyond time and space. We grope around in the dark and find our way to the granite vault. We have to remove the clamps placed over the vault before we get a glimpse of Athi Varadar. Words can never express what we experience at that moment. It is as if we are getting the most special most sublime blessings of Athi Varadar.

We instinctively wipe away the slush that has accumulated over his face first and then his entire body. It is then that we notice the sixteen huge stones with hooded Naga sculptures on them. These stones are placed all around the Athi Varadar idol to prevent it from floating up. We can feel the intensity of the spiritual vibrations that are radiating out of the Athi Varadar idol and it has a huge psychological impact on all of us.

Sayana Kolam and Nindra Kolam

We then carefully lift the idol out of the granite vault and place in the Vasanta Mantapa in the Sri Varadaraja Swamy temple premises. The temple doors remain closed till we clean the entire idol thoroughly. We then do the Alankara for Athi Varadar. We adorn him with resplendent silks, diamond – ruby and other gem-studded jewellery and then drape garlands of fresh flowers around his entire body.

The Athi Varadar idol is open for darshan for exactly 48 days. For the first 31 days, Athi Varadar lies in a reclining position which is called Sayana or Ekantha Kolam.

He then holds the standing posture called Nindra Kolam for the last 17 days. On the 49th day, we offer our prayers to Athi Varadar, perform all the rituals perfectly, place the idol of Athi Varadar back into the granite vault below the Ananta Saras tank."

The idol of Athi Varadar

The devotees of Athi Varadar chiselled his idol out of a fig tree (known as the Athi maram in Tamil) several hundred years ago. The idol of Athi Varadar actually belongs to Athiyur, a small village which lies at some distance from Kanchipuram. Fig trees grew in abundance there. So he is also known as Athiyuran. He is also fondly addressed as Arulala Perumal because he fulfils all the wishes of his devotees even when they ask him for nothing.

Initially, there was a small hillock at Athiyur where an idol of Yoga Narasimha was enshrined. The temple for Sri Varadaraja

Swamy was built later on atop this hillock. Even today, we find the shrine for Yoga Narasimha at the base of the temple. We have to climb a flight of 24 steps to reach the Sri Varadaraja Swamy temple.

Athi Varadar's mystery remains unsolved

In the early part of the 16th century, during the Vijayanagara dynasty's rule, people used to worship Athi Varadar in the sanctum sanctorum. But for some strange reason, in the late 16th century, Athi Varadar's idol was replaced with the stone idol that we see today. And since then we have continued with the practice of keeping the Athi Varadar idol in an underground vault in the Ananta Saras tank.

It's strange but true – there are over 350 inscriptions of various dynasties all around the temple premises. All these inscriptions are very informative and give us several insights about the temple history. But there are absolutely no inscriptional references about the replacement of the idol.

Several devotees visit the ancient temple of Sri Varadaraja Swamy all through the year but the exposition of Athi Varadar was a once in a lifetime opportunity for all Vishnu devotees. They know they will Athi Varadar's most special blessings.

Faith blinds us to reality for a few brief minutes. The ever questioning mind comes to a standstill as we feast our eyes on the stunning 9-foot high idol of Athi Varadar. The fears, the doubts and the bitter memories are evicted out of our hearts to create space for 'Ananda'….He knows. He sees. He takes good

care of us. Yes, all of us. Our souls brim with gratitude as we join the chorus of “Govinda Govinda Govinda….” And we know his beatific smile will linger in our memories for a long long while….